

[City Street]

JUL 6 1939

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview [?]

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Ralph Ellison

ADDRESS 470 W. 150th Street

DATE June 15, 1939

SUBJECT HARLEM

1. Date and time of interview June 14, 1939
2. Place of interview Front of the building at #470 W. 150th Street.
3. Name and address of informant
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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City Street.

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NEW YORK

FORM C

TEXT OF INTERVIEW (UNEDITED)

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NAME OF WORKER Ralph Ellison

ADDRESS 470 W. 150th Street

DATE June 15, 1939

SUBJECT HARLEM

I was sitting up on the bandstand drumming, trying to make myself some beat-up change. Wasnt such a crowd in the place that night, just a bunch a them beer-drinkers. I was looking down at em dancing and wishing that things would liven up. Then a man came up and give me four dollars just to sing one number. Well, I was singing for that man. I was really laying it Jack, just like Marian Anderson. What the hell you talking about; I'd sing all night after that cat done give me four bucks; thats almost a fin! But this is what brings you down. One a these bums come up to the stand and says to the banjo player:

"If you monkeys dont play some music, Im gonna throw you outta de jernt."

Man, I quit singing and looked at that sonofabitch. Then I got mad. I said:

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“Where the goddam hell you come from, you gonna throw somebody outa this band? How you get so bad? Why you poor Brooklyn motherfriger, I'll wreck this goddam place with you.”

Man, he looked at me. I said:

“Dont look at me goddamit, I mean what I say!”

By this time everybody is standing around listening. I said: 2 “I oughta snatch your goddam head off— Oh I know the restill rest'll try to gang me. But they wont get me before I get to you. You crummy bastard.”

Then man, I make a break for my pocket, like I was pulling my gun. Ha, Ha, goddam! You oughta seen em fall back from this cat. This bum had on glasses and you oughta seen him holding up his hands and gitting out amy way. Then the boss came up rinning running and put the sonofabitch out into the street and told me to get back to work. Hell, I scaired the hell out of that bastard. A poor sonofabitch! Drinking beer and coming up talking to us like that! You see he thought cause we was black he could talk like he wanted to. In a night club and drinking beer! I fixed him. I bet he wont try that no more.

Man, a poor white man is a bring-down. He aint got nothing. He cant get nothing. And he thinks cause hes white hes got to impress you cause you black.

Then some of em comes up and try to be your friend. Like the other night; Im up on the stand drumming and singing, trying to make myself some change. I was worried. I got a big old boy, dam near big as me, and every time I look up hes got to have something. Well the other night I hadnt made a dam thing. And I was sitting there drumming when one of these bums what hangs around the place-one a these slaphappy jitterbugs, comes up to me and says:

“You stink!”

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Now you know that made me mad before I even knowed what he was talking about. A white cat coming up to me talking about I stink? I said: "What you talking about. What you mean I stink? He said: "You aint a good follow like the other cats. You wont take me up to Harlem and show me around." I said:

"Hell yes, mammydodger, I stink! If thats what you mean Im gon 3 always stink. Youll never catch me carrying a bunch of you poor sonsabitches up there. What the hell you gonna do when you get up there? You aint got nothing. Hell, you poor as I am. I dont see you coming down to Harlem to carry me up to show me the Bronx. You dam right I stink." Man, he just looks at me now and says:

"Jack, you sho a funny cat."

Can you beat that? He oughta know I aint got no use for him. DAM!

Another one comes up to me - another one a these beer-drinking bums- and says:

"I want to go up to your house sometime."

I said:

"Fo what! Now you tell me fo what!" I said: What-in-the-world do you want to come up to my place for? You aint got nothing and I sho aint got nothing. Whats a poor colored cat and a poor white cat gonna do together? You aint got nothing cause you too dumb to get it. And I aint got nothins cause Im I'm black. I guess you got your little ol skin, thats the reason? Im supposed to feel good cause you walk in my house and sit in my chairs? Hell, that skin aint no more good to you than mine is to me. You caint marry one a Du Points Pons daughters, and I know dam well I caint. So what the hell you gon do up to my place?"

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Aw man, I have to get these white cats told. They think you supposed to feel good cause they friendly to you. Boy I dont fool with em. They just the reason why I caint get ahead now. They try to get all a mans money. Thats just the reason why I found me a place up the street here. [?] Got two rooms in a private house witha private bath. These other cats go down to Ludwig Baumans and give him all their money so they can meet you on the street and say: "Oh you must come up to my apartment sometimes. Oh yes, yes, I have some 4 lovely furniture. You just must come up sometime; You know, man, they want to show off. But me I done got wise. Im getting my stuff outa junk shops, second hand stores, anywhere. I aint giving these Jews ny money. Like the chicks. I used to get my check and go out with the boys and pick up some of these fine feathered chicks. You know the light chicks with the fine hair. Wed go out making all the gin mills, buying liquor. Id take em to a room and have a ball. Then Id wake up in the morning with all my beatup change gone and Id I'd have to face my wife and tell her some deep lie - that she didnt believe. I dont do that no more. Now I give most of my money to my wife. And I put the rest on the numbers. And when I see the fine chicks I tell 'em they have to wait till the numbers jumps out.

See this bag? I got me a head a cabbage and two years a corn. Im going up here and get me a side a bacon. When I get home, gonna cook the cabbage and bacon, gonna make me some corn fritters and set back in my twenty-five-dollars-a-month room and eat my fritters and cabbage and tell the Jews to forgit it! Jack I'm just sitting back waiting, cause soon things is gonna narrow down to the fine point. Hitlers gonna reach in a few months and grab and then thingsll start. All the white folksll be killing off one another. And I hope they do a good job! Then there wont be nobody left but Sam. Then we'll be fighting it out amongst ourselves. That'll be a funky fight. Aw hell yes! When Negroes start running things I think I'll have to get off the earth before its too late!